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DE RUEHBO #3296/01 2891731
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 161730Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0413

UNCLAS BOGOTA 003296

CODEL
SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: REP. MEEKS RECEIVES RECOGNITION FOR WORK ON AFRO-COLOMBIAN
ISSUES

REF: 09 BOGOTA 3143

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (U) Representative Gregory Meeks visited Cali October 11-12 to receive an award from the University Santiago of Cali (USC) for his work promoting the rights of the Afro-Colombian community. He also met with: Afro-Colombian Fulbright students; the Board of Directors of USC; members of the Afro-Colombian Caucus; leaders of Afro-Colombian organizations and the business community; and the Mayor of Cali and Governor of Valle del Cauca. While many of the Afro-Colombian leaders complained of continuing problems in their communities, the Mayor and Governor disputed the need for affirmative action policies. Charge d'Affaires (CDA), Bogota USAID Mission Director, and Meeks' Chief of Staff Sophia King accompanied the Congressman. End Summary.

USC PRESENTS TWO NEW INITIATIVES FOR AFRO-COLOMBIANS

[12.](#) (U) The Board of Directors of the University Santiago of Cali presented two initiatives for promoting social inclusion:

- a Master's program in Afro-American studies focused on the history and culture of Afro-descendants through the Americas; and
- an entrepreneurship program that gives seed money to young Afro-Colombian entrepreneurs to start their business.

The Board of Directors also asked Congressman Meeks for help creating exchange programs with U.S. universities.

MEEKS ENCOURAGES AFRO-COLOMBIAN STUDENTS TO PROMOTE CHANGE

[13.](#) (U) On October 12, the USC awarded Congressman Meeks with a medal for his work on Afro-Colombian issues. Before receiving the medal, he delivered a speech to a group of 150 Afro-Colombian students, joined by USC faculty members and community leaders. He told the audience that positive change for Afro-Colombian rights was possible and had already begun.

AFRO-COLOMBIAN CAUCUS EXPLAINS REASON FOR DELAYS

IN THE LAW OF EQUALITY AND OPPORTUNITY

¶4. (SBU) Congressman Meeks met with Representatives Franklin Legro, Maria Isabel Urrutia, and Efren Palacios from the Afro-Colombian Caucus, as well as the Executive Secretary, Cesar Garcia to discuss the status of the Law on Equality and Opportunity for Afro-Colombians. (Note: The Law on Equality and Opportunity is supposed to implement the recommendations of the Intersectoral Commission made public in May 2009. End Note.) Representative Legro explained the introduction of the bill to Congress had been delayed due to disagreements between the Vice President and Ministry of Interior and Justice (MOIJ). He also noted that the pre-electoral campaign season was making it difficult to get any bill passed through Congress and it would be very difficult to get the law passed this legislative term.

NEED FOR COMMUNICATION BETWEEN

AFRO-COLOMBIAN GROUPS AND POLITICAL REPS.

¶5. (U) Congressman Meeks met with a group of twelve Afro-Colombian leaders from civil society and eight from the business community. Each meeting highlighted the need for more communication among the Afro-Colombian Caucus, civil society, and business community. Many of the members of civil society and the business community complained that their concerns were not listened to by the national government.

¶6. (U) Afro-Colombian leaders complained about lack of funding and responsiveness from the national government, land titling problems, displacement, and the persistence of discrimination. Business leaders were frustrated by a lack of access to credit and economic opportunities. The U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) briefly came up and while most business leaders were supportive, one leader expressed concern that, once the FTA passes, the national government will not feel the political pressure from Washington to accede to Afro-Colombian demands.

MAYOR/GOVERNOR DISPUTE NEED FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

¶7. (SBU) During dinner with Cali Mayor Jorge Ivan Ospina and Governor of the Valle del Cauca Department Juan Carlos Abadia, Congressman Meeks discussed affirmative action, drugs, and the FTA. Both the Mayor and the Governor disputed the need for racial based affirmative action policies. The Governor asserted that everyone in the Valle del Cauca Department was treated equally under the law. He claimed 45% of the senior officials working in the departmental government were of Afro-descent. The Mayor argued that affirmative action policies didn't make sense when they were based on race. He instead argued they should be based on geographic location. After an in-depth discussion, both conceded that they might have taken too narrow a view of the problem and said they would again review their policies with an eye toward promoting greater inclusion.

18. (SBU) The Mayor confirmed that drug consumption was up in Cali, as was violence due to drug trafficking. He mentioned that in the last two weeks there had been 35 homicides all related to drug trafficking. He asked for more help with dealing with this problem, as it was too big to deal with at the city level. The Governor mentioned the recent confiscation in Buenaventura done in coordination with the United States, but also asked for more help in combating drug traffickers in Valle del Cauca.

19. (SBU) Both the Mayor and Governor expressed concerns with the FTA. The Mayor, a physician and former hospital administrator, feared that the FTA would hinder pharmaceutical companies' production of generic drugs. The Governor told us the FTA would weaken the ability of labor unions to negotiate for higher labor standards. CDA responded that the FTA favorably addresses both of those issues, and encouraged the two officials to review the text of the agreement. He added that Colombia had already lost foreign direct investment in comparison to those countries in the region, like Peru and Chile, which had a ratified FTA with the United States.

10. (U) CODEL Meeks cleared this message.
NICHOLS